Gender and Generations: Exploring Gender at the Frontiers of the Colony

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Abstract: This essay addresses two unanswered questions on gender justice in postcolonial Francophone Africa. It asks why countries of Francophone Africa invariably occupy the lowest ranks in global gender equity tables, and why this underperformance continues to map onto the colonial geography of the continent three generations after the end of colonial rule. Existing sociological methodologies aimed at evaluating gender equity are failing to identify why gender inequalities in countries of the former French African empires remain more pronounced than in any other part of the world. Drawing from fieldwork and research conducted in countries across Francophone Africa, it is argued that the creation and persistence of such inequalities are better understood if evaluated in the context of the cultural histories of the regions in which they persist. As the cultural histories of the former colonies are still being written, the discussion incorporates new and emerging historical research on earlier studies of African women led by female researchers during the 1930s. These include the reports and correspondence of a substantial colonial tour commissioned by the French Socialist government of 1936 to record the social impact of colonisation on African women living in seven colonies of French West Africa. In addition, analysis of the records of two pioneering French researchers, the first women to conduct anthropological fieldwork in French Africa, is helping illuminate how gender has been perceived by colonisers in this part of the world, and combined with contemporary fieldwork and policy analysis, contributing to our growing understanding of why inequality persists in certain geographical contexts that share a colonial history, and why in the former colonies of French Africa, the path gender equity has been following differs from those observed in all other postcolonial developing areas to the point where the situation in Francophone Africa is historically unique.

Keywords: Francophone Africa, colonial legacy, gender justice.

Gender in a developing world context

Gender rose to the top of the international political agenda in the developing world over 25 years ago.[1] Now gender equity is a key concept in a raft of international development targets aimed at generating 'human development' which sees populations in the global south empowered to access the social benefits of economic development. In respect of gender equity, these benefits of development are typically measured in terms of ease of access to educational structures, lifelong uptake and access to public health services, employment and training opportunities, income, political representation and, more latterly, political participation, particularly in the post-1990 era in the former French colonies.[2] The post-Cold War political landscape that caused a shift towards

[1] The high point was the United Nations' global women's conference held in Beijing in 1995, which was the fourth and final summit in a series that had begun in Mexico in 1975, followed by Copenhagen in 1980 and Nairobi in 1985.

[2] Between the founding of Saint Louis on the mouth of the Senegal River in 1659 and the establishment of the Federation of French Equatorial Africa in Brazzaville in 1910, the French State created an empire in sub-Saharan Africa fourteen times the size of France. The

democratisation in French policy on development in Africa also enabled the human development agenda to come to the fore, generating an environment that would prove more propitious for those wishing to see gender equity enter the policy-making agenda for Francophone Africa.[3]

With the change in political climate and with national priorities focusing on social as well as economic and technical targets, the absence of social data was perceived as a primary obstacle to progress. The issue was not unique to Francophone Africa, data production was already on the agenda in the 1980s at the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the international agency that coordinates goal-setting and the collection of policy-relevant information for the international community's relations with and assistance to developing countries. By the end of the decade, the UNDP had adopted a new reporting mechanism for the dissemination of social development data worldwide. It led to the introduction of the annual *Human Development Report* in 1990, which brought together, for the first time, information on how populations all around the globe were accessing social goods. That the information needed to supply these data was lacking, particularly in Francophone Africa, became visible in the annual reports.

National reviews on women in Francophone Africa: a first attempt at filling the information gap

The 1990s witnessed a first effort in the Francophone countries to fill the information gap on how populations were experiencing development and, notably, how women as well as men were experiencing those social goods that were deemed to lead to 'human development', primarily quantified in relation to access to education, training, health, political representation and independent income.[4] These social goods, conceived as 'variables', were converted into data, and then disaggregated for gender, with a view

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colonies were Benin, Burkina-Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal and Togo which federated as *l'Afrique occidentale française*, and Gabon, Cameroon, Congo, Chad and the Central African Republic which became *l'Afrique équatoriale française*. A small east African presence was maintained in current day Djibouti. Independence from France was achieved in most of the sub-Saharan colonies in 1960, with last vestige on the mainland gaining independence as Djibouti in 1977.

[3] After Independence, the former French colonies of Africa established very close postcolonial ties with France. In the political realm, biennial summits have served as the key arena in which France presents its 'Africa policy'. In the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin wall, President François Mitterrand announced a change in the political relationship. In addition to the existing economic and technical conditions tied to development aid, French funding for Africa would henceforth come with social and political conditions attached. This move helped raise the visibility of social inequalities in the former French colonies.

[4] For a more detailed discussion of how the legal, administrative, economic and political structures of French colonial rule combined over several decades to generate the distinct and, it is argued here unique, gender conditions that prevailed in French Africa from the first decade of the 20th century to the present day see Claire H. Griffiths, *Globalizing the Postcolony: Contesting Discourses of Gender and Development in Francophone Africa* (Lanham, MD., USA: Lexington Books, kindle edition, 2011), 143-162. In addition

to revealing how potent the variable of female gender is in predicting an individual's access to human development. Filling the human development information gap, along with a first attempt at gaining some insight into how gender operated as a factor of exclusion from the social benefits of development, became the focus of national reviews carried out in country across Francophone Africa in the period 1990-1995.[5]

These reviews were invariably sponsored by the local offices of the UNDP, related UN agencies and French-speaking donor countries. As such, they usually followed a format determined outside the academic community of the country conducting the national review. Exogenous framing of gender as a social variable is a common characteristic of knowledge generation in these regions. In addition, the reviews took a short historical timeframe, covering the period since independence from French rule. A broad range of structural and financial factors were evaluated against standards set by and monitored within the international development community.[6] These reports did not ignore cultural factors opposing the integration of women and girls into progressive social development. Catch-all terms such as *les mentalités*,[7] or veiled references to traditional mores and practices that pre-date European influences, peppered the reviews without engaging directly with controversial practices such as female genital mutilation and polygyny.

The national reviews proved of limited value. From an analytical perspective, they lacked historical and cultural depth, and from the policy-making perspective they flagged up the lack of 'policy-relevant' information. Henceforth responsibility for filling the gap in what was considered 'policy-relevant' information was passed to the UN agencies under the auspices of the UNDP and its human development publications.

International human development data - a second attempt at filling the information gap

Standard political and social science approaches deployed to analyse and explain policy underperformance focus on systems and structures operating at the national level that are designed to optimise policy implementation. This approach generates knowledge

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[5] The author analysed closely three national reports and corresponding reports from international agencies in Gabon, Senegal, and Niger. The source documents were only accessible in the countries under review.

[6] The international development community in this context comprises the UN agencies, other Bretton Woods institutions such as the World Bank and the ILO, the bilateral aid missions of donor countries, and the international NGOs with a gender agenda.

[7] UNICEF, *Analyse de la situation des enfants et des femmes au Gabon*. Working document. (Libreville, Gabon: UNICEF, 1995), 81. This report was commissioned as a follow-up to the Gabonese national review *Rapport general du Forum National sur la Condition de la Femme Gabonaise* of 1992. The latter publication followed none of the standard formats for these reviews. It consisted for half of its length of full transcripts of speeches followed by a plethora of commentaries on relevant issues including a noteworthy 'Poem of the Forum' penned by a schoolgirl describing what formal education has meant to her. Her poem speaks of being sexually harassed by male teachers, ending up pregnant, and getting turfed out with no relevant qualifications, a very different scenario from the optimistic one imagined by the international community.

on delivery and uptake that helps shape future policy formulation and as such is vital in effective policy design. It can and does help identify structural factors currently obstructing the implementation of policy solutions.

However, from an analytical perspective, it is flawed in three significant regards. Firstly, it does not illuminate how structures that operate against the delivery and uptake of social goods have emerged.

Secondly, the methodology of data production homogenises the population at the heart of the enquiry – in this case African women – to a point beyond history and culture. In this generalised, impressionistic world of development politics, populations of women and girls who live in those nation states that were once French African colonies are contained within a mass of numerical approximations and estimations that cross territorial, linguistic and cultural frontiers. The individual and collective disappear into a single disambiguated referent to arrive at a representation of 'African woman' encapsulated in a single value.

Thirdly, it can and has been argued that there is a racialized dimension to the discursive landscape of development in the postcolonial space. Not only does the meta-narrative sustain disambiguated dehumanisation of populations across the developing world, this dehumanisation reaches its most extreme point in Africa. As Achille Mbembe has argued "The African human experience constantly appears in the discourse of our times as an experience that can only be understood through a *negative interpretation* … It is in relation to Africa that the notion of 'absolute otherness' has been taken farthest" (2001, 1). Where Mbembe's reflection on Africa as the epitome of 'otherness' falls short, is in his failure to layer onto this configuration of otherness the role in Western consciousness of gender, which is most evident in colonial (and more latterly postcolonial) contexts where gender constituted one of the struts upon which the grand narrative of empire was built. The dominant colonial discourse that cast the African woman as the epitome of 'everything *we* are not', this ultimate racial, sexual and economic other, is represented in the postcolonial era in numerical knowledge that has converted entire female populations into single numerical values and placed these in a ranking topped by the Western nations of the global North with Africa at the bottom.[8] The data serve to crystallise in the most easily readable of all formats - the single numerical value – the ultimate 'otherness' of the African woman.

Notwithstanding the massive explosion in calculative technologies and their outputs over the past three decades, we are left with a paucity of cultural information on the capacity of individuals to access what is valued in our cultures as human development.

The next section addresses this issue by exploring how gender has been studied in a historical context. It questions an unchallenged assumption in much contemporary research on gender and social justice in the postcolony that studies conducted during the colonial era can be integrated into postcolonial knowledge production only by

[8] See United Nations Development Program, *Human Development Report 1995,* (New York: UNDP, 1995), 76-77. The global 'Gender Development Index' appears in all reports published from 1995.

deconstructing the non-feminist and patriarchal discourses in which, it is assumed, they are framed. The discussion here suggests an opposite view; returning to selected sources may contribute to deconstructing the contemporary dominant discourse of 'universal' gender values that underpins gender policy-making in Francophone Africa today.

Gender as cultural history: a third attempt at knowledge production

A recent re-engagement with scholarship from the pre-Independence period is providing evidence to suggest that the traditional chronological frame of reference that positions colonial research as a precursor, both epistemologically and chronologically, to postcolonial scholarship on gender politics is not only inadequate but also misleading.

Notwithstanding the considerable challenges scholars of women's history and gender history face when working in a colonial context, given the lacunae and inadequacies of the reporting mechanisms and epistemological structures that produced the colonial archive[9], and the frequent failure of colonial authorities to report on the impact the imperial project was having on female subject populations, the history of women's experience of colonisation is still being written. This has included introducing new research methodology, and deconstructing earlier patriarchal accounts.[10] A re-reading of early sources such as the writings of Ibn Battuta provides one example from pre-colonial Francophone Africa. Completing his travels around the known world in the Malian Empire in the second quarter of the fourteenth century, Battuta notes the 'immodest' dress and insubordinate behaviour of West African women in their relations with males in the African superpower of the 1350s (Berger and White, 1999).[11]

Similarly, sources from the colonial era can also be re-read 'against the grain'[12], although records compiled by white Western male reporters, explorers, missionaries and representatives of governments, frequently excluded the female subject population. What Ann Laura Stoler has described as the politics of disregard, the systematic overlooking of a subject class in western imperial regimes across the globe,[13] reached its nadir in relation to the colonised female. As the western imperial project defined itself in terms of what it was not, and what it was not, most emphatically in this political

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[9] In postcolonial studies, the term 'archive' can be used metaphorically to denote not just the organisation and physical conservation of official documents produced during the colonial era, but the conceptual construction and categorisation of this body of knowledge. Following the poststructuralist approach, this usage accommodates the possibility of 'knowledges' being produced that challenge existing histories of colonisation.

[10] See Niara Sudakhasa (1996) on developing research epistemology and methodologies in African gender studies, and Berger and White (1999) on feminist re-readings of patriarchal scholarship.

[11] Berger and White, 1999, 65.

[12] A process used in Indian Subaltern Studies in the 1970s and widely used since in postcolonial studies.

[13] Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 237- 277.

imaginary, was female and non-white, this resulted, unsurprisingly, in a relative paucity of resources directly addressing the subject of women in official colonial archives. This void accommodated exogenous assumptions exported from Western cultures about the natural inferiority of women. As Josephine Beoku-Betts has argued "Western middle class ideas about the dependence of women were never really applicable to West African women" (2005, 22). In these contexts, deconstruction and re-reading against the grain have been most productive.[14] Building on these approaches, research has been turning towards a greater engagement with critical and innovative research conducted during the colonial era to uncover more diverse and culturally-embedded understandings of the societies inhabiting the colonies of sub-Saharan Africa.[15]

In this vein, Felix Driver's work on Winwood Reade is of interest less for what it tells us about gender in a colonial context than how it illustrates the gap that opened up between the Western policy-maker in Africa and scholarship of Africa. In *The Martyrdom of Man*, an account of two years of study in West Africa, Reade writes "I was gradually led from the history of Africa into writing the history of the world" (1872, Preface). Driver notes the significance of Reade's work:

> In short, he found [in *The Martyrdom of Man*] Africa as a world-historical subject. Not the Africa of the philosophers, like Hegel, who could not imagine an African history worthy of the name. Nor the Africa of the diplomats and statesmen, for whom the map was always more important than the territory. […] the peoples of Africa were at the heart of this story, actively making history rather than being left behind by it. (2011, np)

Of marginal influence at its time of writing, the afterlife of *The Martydom of Man* shaped African-American histories of Africa through its impact on African-American intellectual and historian W.E.B. Dubois. Likewise, the afterlife of a body of work exploring gender relations in interwar French Africa is now, eighty years after its production, generating findings of relevance to contemporary policy-making in Francophone Africa.

Known as the Savineau Report[16], this administrative document numbering over 800 pages lay virtually unconsulted for sixty years in the former French colonial archives in Dakar, Senegal.[17] It is now the subject of extensive interrogation in the 21st

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[14] Discussions on the othering of African women have proliferated since the 1980s; notable pioneers whose work remains of current interest include Diane Barthel (1985), and Ifi Amadiume (1987).

[15] The cultural 'turn' in African historiography of France in Africa began in the 1950s, pioneered in the work of Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop, who addressed both the racial and gendered dimensions of the othering that shaped the interactions between French colonial authorities and African subjects in the French colonies. See Diop, (1966).

[16] *Archives nationales du Sénégal* thereafter *ANS*, 17G 381 (126).

[17] In 2000, the chief archivist of the Senegalese National Archives asked the present author to evaluate a holding, entitled *le rapport Savineau*, he had discovered a few years earlier lying, apparently forgotten and neglected, in a filing cabinet. As the documents were disintegrating,

century.[18] The result of an administrative tour commissioned by the *Front populaire*, the first Socialist-Communist collation government in France, in 1937, the Savineau Report records the impact of colonisation on African women in the French West African Empire. It was the first and only report of its type to be produced by the French colonial authorities. It was, in its time, a momentous event, seven colonies of the former empire, each subject to an extensively-researched field report on the lives of women and girls, and including opinions from participants whose voices had hitherto never been heard in official records. One such voice belonged to an African educator who flagged up a problem that remains unresolved today. Speaking to the report's author in February 1938, the headmaster of the regional primary school in Ouagadougou, Adama Monaco, argued in favour of integrating girls more effectively into the education system by removing existing gender barriers.[19] By contrast in the same region, Madame Brun, a French-trained primary-school teacher argued for segregation.[20] Gender segregation became the norm as secondary and tertiary education developed across French West Africa from the late 1930s.

The report's potential to stimulate debate and exert an impact on policies affecting women in the African colonies was immense. As it transpired, interest in the tour and its findings was as short-lived as the government itself.[21] By contrast, its relevance to current research is considerable and growing, and underscores Peter Burke's observation in his 'Afterthoughts' on mnemohistory when he notes how 'the revival of interest in events now focuses on their afterlives' (262). The Savineau Report and related documents provide new insights not only on how the structures underpinning the imperial venture in Africa shaped gender politics, but also how its educational values may have contributed in the past, and still be contributing to 'gendering' the colony. In Report 6 the *rapporteuse* finds herself in Benin from where she reports a discussion on the perceived disempowerment of girls exposed to faith-based Catholic education.[22] The imposition of exogenous (French) educational values was of course the norm, and became increasingly so as educational infrastructure developed.

Independence in 1960 did not bring a clear break in educational and cultural links with the former metropole. Indeed, the number of French teachers recruited for the former colonies increased in the aftermath of decolonisation.[23] In the years after Independence in 1960, this reluctance on the part of France to relinquish political,

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a complete photocopy was made, now in the personal collection of the author, from which a digital version was later produced (see note 20) along with a CD-Rom version for the *ANS*.

[18] The entire holding has been digitised and is accessible in the original French, with English translations and digital corpus search tools at www.francophoneafricaarchive.org.

[19] Rapport 8, 28.

[20] Rapport 9, 17.

[21] The *Front populaire* came to power in May 1936. While its deputies remained in office until September 1939, the government itself dissolved in April 1938.

[22] Rapport 6, 23.

[23] This formed a central pivot in the effort to ensure French remained the world language of choice. In the decades since 1960 that policy has diversified into many areas of cultural and intellectual activity.

cultural and economic influence in its former African colonies provoked fierce controversy in France, crystallising in the widely-adopted term *la Françafrique* which is still used to imply that a sort of neo-colonialism permeates France's relations with Francophone African countries.[24] Concentrating initially on France's overly close political and economic ties with the new Francophone African leadership, the academic critique of the Franco-African axis has focused more recently on the cultural and intellectual influence which still permeates this 'special relationship' between ex-colonial power and formerly subject states. While post-colonial critical studies have been slow to establish in the French academy, questioning colonial ways of seeing and knowing the colonised other has been seen more widely in French historical research on Africa in the 21st century. In this category, we find Marianne Lemaire's edited publication of a set of letters relating to the work of two ground-breaking French anthropologists, Denise Paulme and Deborah Lipchitz, some of which have never been published for the first time.[25] The letters featured are in the main those sent to France from Sanga, a village in Mali (formerly the French Soudan) by the two women. These letters record their first trip to French Africa in 1935, which began under the tutelage of prominent and influential Africanist, Marcel Griaule. The women parted company after only two months with Griaule, who had tried unsuccessfully to impose his style of ethnographic research on Paulme and Lifchitz. Rejecting what she saw as an unnecessary focus on the collection of artefacts as the primary means of understanding local culture, and thereafter representing these cultures through artefacts in Paris, Paulme used her time in Sanga to develop a more culturally-embedded approach to the study of life in the region. Charged by her PhD supervisor in Paris, Marcel Mauss, to observe and record '*une société des femmes*', Paulme's nine months of fieldwork, including close observation, led her to conclude that the Western idea of '*une société des femmes*' did not exist in the Dogon region of Mali.

Paulme is one of the earliest known scholars of African studies in French to point to the pitfalls of depending on the binary concept of gender, as it is configured in Western consciousness, to define African social relations. Her interest in the complexity of gender and her search for more meaningful categories for defining social identities guided her research for the next two decades. Her work on gender was reinforced by a series of investigations undertaken by women doctors, political scientists and anthropologists during the late 1940s and 1950s, published as a collection of essays in 1960.[26] These studies supported her earlier findings that gender as a social signifier in societies living under French colonial rule is diverse as opposed to binary. By contrast, in contemporary policy-making in the region, binary gender and exogenous social

[24] For a summary in English, see *Defining Francafrique* by François-Xavier Vershave at https://survie.org/themes/francafrique/article/defining-francafrique-by-francois
[25] Denise Paulme, Deborah Lifchitz, *Lettres de Sanga,* ed. Marianne Lemaire (Paris, France: CNRS Editions, 2015).
[26] Paulme (1960, English translation 1963).

development and educational values frame both policy-making and its targets.[27] While the existence of cultural diversity is acknowledged in the current set of internationally-agreed development goals[28], at no point in the framing of gender policy and adoption of targets has this ever been accommodated.

How scholarship from the past can inform and shape the future of gender policy in a Francophone African context will depend upon the integration, within the policy-making research community, of findings which provide a cultural context to policy-making in the region. Of significance in this endeavour is the growing integration of African scholarship into this emerging body of knowledge. Since the start of the digital age in academic research in the 1990s this has accelerated, enabling earlier and hitherto unknown research on gender to be digitised, and thereby generating new opportunities for local gender research to be disseminated within the wider academic community that informs international policy-making.[29]

Notwithstanding, as the foremost research institutes in Francophone Africa have only very recently recognised gender as an interdisciplinary research theme, this body of work is still, in the regional context, in its infancy.[30]

Conclusions: towards a policy-relevant cultural history of gender equity in Francophone Africa?

By analysing how gender has been defined and problematized across the politico-historical divide that separates colonial and postcolonial worlds, the two distinct 'generational worlds' alluded to in the title, this essay has sought to reveal ways in which gender research from the former French colonies of West Africa can inform policy-making in the present day.

These explorations of gender at the frontier of the colony, in geographical spaces that separated colonised from coloniser, has revealed an epistemological discontinuity between gender in the discourse of policy-making and gender in the lived environment of the populations targeted by the policy-makers.

Opportunities to challenge axiomatic discourses of gender and development are now multiplying as research frontiers continue to push outwards opening up new intellectual

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[27]All countries in the UN system are signed up to a single set of gender and development targets established in 2015 for the period up to 2030 called the 'Structural Development Goals'.

[28] In contrast to the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015), cultural change appears in the Structural Development Goals (2015-2030) as an objective, an example being the abolition of female genital mutilation, described by its defenders as part of the region's 'cultural heritage'.

[29] Historian Professor Penda Mbow, political scientists Dr Rokhaya Fall and Dr Aminata Diaw, sociologists Professors Fatou Sow and Fatou Sow Sarr, are among a number of notable academics whose work has had limited dissemination outside of Francophone Africa.

[30] The *Institut fondamental de l'Afrique noire*, the oldest research institution in the Francophone sub-region, established a gender studies research unit in 2004 shortly followed by Francophone Africa's oldest university, Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar, where 'women's studies' were introduced in 2005.

spaces capable of generating interdisciplinary synergies between bodies of knowledge and methodological traditions.

When social policy-making is analysed in the interstices between political science and cultural history, the colonial-postcolonial divide is removed, and timeframes shift to accommodate generations of research and writing on the evolution of gender as it mediates access to human development. As this essay has argued, it is in the mapping of the cultural history of gender on to the colonial geography of Francophone Africa that findings are now emerging that can contribute in policy-significant ways to our understanding of why gender justice continues to evade quantification and recognition in Francophone Africa today.

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Biography

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